

PARKS AND RECREATION AS AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE:

Using a health equity lens to
strengthen provision in Niagara

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INTRODUCTION

As municipal facilities were shut down, playgrounds cordoned off, older-adult active living centres closed and youth sports cancelled at the start of the pandemic, the central role that municipal parks and recreation departments played in the everyday lives of Niagara residents became apparent. Community members struggled to find ways to exercise, stretch their legs, socialize, and simply get fresh air while adhering to COVID-19 public health protocols that regulated how we interacted in public spaces.

Traditionally, parks and recreation within public policy has been framed according to a public-private good continuum. Research in the early 1980s mapped the role of government in sport and recreation according to the level of services and funding – in cases where program demand and the need for financial support were high, the government typically served a direct provider role (Burton, 1982). Later, Glover and Burton (1998) argued that forms of recreation service delivery may be understood according to the nature of the good, competitive forces, and the amount of government control – ie. municipal servicing is high (and direct government involvement is required) when recreation is viewed as a social good and there is low competition.

In addition, past research on the connection between how people think of themselves as participants in their

communities and the nature of municipal service models found an important positive relationship between recreation service delivery and one's sense of citizenship (Glover & Burton, 1999). The parks and recreation sector is continually trying to position itself so that resource allocations match citizens' service needs. Reflecting on this tension is Crompton (2009), who has always argued the position of parks and recreation is not economic, but rather political – suggesting that when parks and recreation are valued by citizens, support is more forthcoming at budget time.

These past discussions echo again today as COVID-19 forces us to reconsider how municipal delivery of parks and recreation services connects to broader public policy principles such as regionalism, collectivism and inclusivity. But what is missing, especially during these pandemic crisis management times, is the positioning of parks and recreation delivery within a broader public health and community well-being conversation. **Given the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the everyday lives of Niagara residents, this policy brief argues that a health equity lens is critical to ensuring parks and recreation services remain at the forefront of future regional and municipal policies and programs that address quality of life and social well-being.**

THE TRIPLE THREAT

Tensions peaked during the third wave when the Ontario government again announced all outdoor recreation amenities, including playgrounds, would be off-limits. The pushback was so fierce that the government reversed its playground decision within 24 hours. The move to close outdoor public spaces puzzled everyone, especially public health experts who believe outdoor activities are vital for both mental and physical health. Closing public spaces disadvantages individuals who lack access to and rely heavily on these amenities to meet their daily physical, mental, and social needs. The decision was denounced by both the Canadian Paediatric Society and Children's Health Coalition. The immediate and significant outcry and the quick policy reversal regarding playgrounds demonstrates the significant connection citizens have to their public parks and recreation spaces. It should be noted, however, that other public outdoor spaces remained closed.

Throughout the pandemic, municipal recreation leaders across Niagara endeavoured to find ways to provide their programs and services – a struggle that was influenced by many factors including technological capacity, innovation and political direction. The inability to provide such

services had economic, social, and health impacts often highlighting inequities within our communities. Of note is the recent Government of Ontario announcement about its new Community Building Fund to support tourism, culture, sport and recreation. In the government's own words, the necessity of the fund is stated as follows: "COVID-19 has caused unprecedented, devastating impacts on the tourism, culture and sport and recreation sectors resulting in a 'triple threat' of health, economic and social crises in the province." (Ontario, 2021). This "triple threat" concern acknowledges the role of parks and recreation as an important policy tool to address broad society-level crises facing all communities.

This policy brief will illustrate the value of the parks and recreation sector to Niagara residents during the pandemic using empirical evidence such as descriptive data and anecdotes from the region's municipalities. The brief begins by setting the policy context within which the sector operates and then introduces a health equity lens, followed by empirical evidence to support our case. The brief concludes with a discussion and recommendations of how the sector can move forward post-pandemic, providing the programs and services that residents value.

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THE PARKS AND RECREATION LANDSCAPE

The parks and recreation sector is supported by all levels of government and aligned with the Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries, whose mandate is: “working to improve quality of life and promoting economic growth by supporting and delivering tourism and cultural experiences, supporting the arts and cultural industries and championing participation in sport and recreation activities across Ontario” (Ontario, 2020). At the federal level, efforts to strengthen this sector are also evident. In 2015, the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association in partnership with the Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council released “A Framework for Recreation in Canada: Pathways to Wellbeing” with five overarching goals: Active Living, Inclusion and Access; Connecting People and Nature; Supportive Environments, and Recreation Capacity.

At the local level, municipalities and their staff are tasked with the challenge of providing opportunities that improve the quality of life for all their citizens. The scope of the parks and recreation sector is vast and varies from community to community but can be categorized as broadly encompassing three areas: facilities and open space, programs and services, and special events (Smale & Reid, 2002). In Niagara, across 12 municipalities, parks and recreation departments provide services and programs that range from day camps, public skating and swim lessons to special events such as Canada Day and New Year’s celebrations in numerous facilities and open spaces.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, some overall positive trends were seen in the sector including significant increases in the passive use of facilities, the engagement of residents in physical activity, and the demand for individual/small group recreational activities such as golf, pickleball, tennis, walking, trail usage, running, biking, and skateboarding. However, access to such services and programs was not available to everyone. Rather, an individual's ability to access recreation during the spring and summer of 2020 and spring 2021 was dependent on personal resources (such as transportation, equipment, time, or finances), and/or individual capacity (such as the ability to locate programs or navigate the Internet). Community members who lacked these personal resources and capacities, who traditionally participated in team sports, and who relied on public access to parks and recreation via facilities and programs were at a significant disadvantage. **Thus, the pandemic is a catalyst for the parks and recreation sector to validate and advocate that community members of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds must be able to access essential spaces and services. A health equity lens can help us move closer to achieving this goal.**

According to the World Health Organization (2010), health equity is "described by the absence of unfair and avoidable or remediable differences in health among social groups" (p.4). This definition guides many health stakeholder perspectives at the national, provincial, regional and municipal levels in Canada. Calls for 'health in all' policies at the federal government level frame health care as a social right that requires a multi-sector systematic approach and a pan-Canadian action plan (Tonelli, Tang, & Forest, 2020).

In Ontario, the 2016 annual report from the Office of the Chief Medical Officer, titled "Improving the Odds Championing Health Equity in Ontario," called for the public health sector to "champion health equity" by bringing "a wide range of partners together to develop policies and programs that reduce or eliminate social, economic and environmental barriers to good health" (Ontario, 2018, p. 2). The Ontario Public Health Association's vision of health equity is that all people (individuals, groups, and communities) have a fair chance at reaching their full health potential and are not disadvantaged by social, economic, and environmental conditions (OPHA, 2021).

Locally, Niagara Region Public Health (2021) advocates a health equity approach as opposed to a health-equality approach where citizens receive "supports, services and resources" that best serve their individual needs rather than serve one universal need for all. In the 2018 "Niagara Region Public Health Strategic Plan Background Report", the term health equity is defined as everyone having "the opportunity to reach their full health potential and are free from social, economic, demographic, or geographic barriers to health" (Ogunniyi, 2018, p. 4). Other position papers connect additional Niagara service areas with a health equity orientation, such as paramedicine (Mako et al., 2018), and address capacity in public health units to improve health equity (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, 2015).

Beyond public health, the "Community Safety and Well-Being Plan", a Niagara Region initiative, provides an additional potential touchpoint between parks and recreation services and broader social policy efforts across the region. The initiative aligns with the regional government's 'Health and Vibrant Communities' strategic priority and is underway due to the Ontario government's requirement that municipal governments adopt a public safety and well-being plan. The effort is led by an advisory committee who coordinates community consultations and, due to the pandemic, has integrated the work of the Community Planning Recovery Table, and overall COVID-19 community recovery as part of its focus. A 2020 interim report by the advisory committee noted the importance of "identifying, prioritizing and addressing issues that impact the health, safety and well-being of Niagara residents beyond the COVID-19 pandemic" (Niagara Region, 2020, p. 3), which are well-recognized outcomes of public parks and recreation programs and places.





METHODOLOGY

Vignettes, which are short scenarios from the perspective of parks and recreation professionals in Niagara, allowed us to highlight the various ways the pandemic challenged the sector. These vignettes, or exemplars, draw upon information and descriptive data to support the development of this policy brief. Vignettes facilitate the contextualization of a research topic because they “provide entry points to what can be complex research questions” (Kandemir & Budd, 2018, para 2) and “selectively stimulate elements of the research topic under study” (Hughes & Huby, 2002, p. 383).

Each municipal parks and recreation department was contacted with three requests: provide one story about increased and/or different demand for services during COVID-19; provide the #1 social media post from 2020; and provide notable usage data from 2020 (March to December) that demonstrates an increased demand in their respective community. Nine municipalities replied and we therefore have confidence

in the statements made regarding the response from a regionwide perspective. Discussions among the research team on the information provided allowed us to determine what statements best reflected the effect of the pandemic on the sector. Additional insights were gained by reviewing documents such as local newspaper articles related to COVID-19, municipal COVID-19 recovery frameworks, and internally gathered statistics from stakeholders in the region. Below, we have vignettes about municipal facilities and programming, taken directly from the information submitted, followed by an overview of what happened with outdoor amenities, using newspaper reports and descriptive data collection. This section on empirical evidence concludes with a look at how the Active Niagara Network – an informal network of municipal parks and recreation leaders – advanced during the pandemic to become a conduit for vital information-sharing and support as pandemic regulations evolved.

FACILITIES



Skateparks

Vignette #1: Our community has always lacked a skatepark – even though community members have wanted one for years. Spearheaded by local youth, the project became a reality and construction was scheduled to begin in the spring of 2020. Originally scheduled to open in August 2020, construction delays associated with COVID-19 affected the opening dates. After years of waiting, the park was officially opened in October 2020 with a socially distanced, masked, grand opening ceremony. The way the skatepark is used has been impacted by COVID-19 as users must adhere to gathering limits, wear masks, and socially distance themselves from others. Regardless of the requirements, use of the skatepark has been so popular that a security company was hired to help oversee and educate users on COVID-19 policies. As a department, we were committed to continuing with the project during the pandemic because providing access to outdoor activities was important, especially for the youth in our community.

Pools

Vignette #2: Our community opened one of two swimming pools and developed a modified programming schedule that included lane swims, family swims, and pool rentals. For the first time ever, we needed to develop an online booking system for all pool programming. On the first day that the online booking portal opened, all lane swims were booked for the entire summer. The demand for pool access far exceeded staff expectations and we received a lot of backlash as many residents could not book swim times. We had to adjust to this increased demand by adding additional swim times on weekends and evenings, and imposing restrictions for online bookings to one week at a time. As a department we were committed to making ongoing adjustments to the pool programming to ensure community members, especially our older members of the community, could exercise in a safe atmosphere during the pandemic.

Arenas

Vignette #3: Our community adapted during the pandemic to allow the ice to remain in both of our two arenas. Staff worked to ensure that protocols were in place to allow for the use of the facility as soon as restrictions would allow. In July, as restrictions loosened, both rinks were opened. Ice rentals were the only type of programming available during July and August. With both rinks fully operational, ice time was booked seven days a week from 7am – 10pm daily at a capacity never previously experienced at the facility. At the beginning of the fall rental season in September, we continued to ensure ice in both rinks were available and that licensed user groups were able to secure their schedules. Any available open ice time was quickly taken by private user groups.

PROGRAMMING

Summer Camps

Vignette #4: Our community decided to offer summer camps, as we have done in previous years. In adhering to the Ontario 2020 Summer Camp Guidelines, we had to make major modifications to our camp programming. For example, we only allowed full-week registrations, and offered three camp cohorts (two summer cohorts operating out of our community centre, and one sports camp cohort running out of our arena) with a maximum of eight children per cohort. Being limited by eight children per cohort limited our registrations, however our full-week camp registrations were slightly higher than in 2019 (142 in 2020 compared to 135 in 2019).

Virtual Recreation Program Offerings

Many communities shifted to offering virtual programs and services to connect to community members and remain relevant. Local examples included blog posts, podcasts, a virtual Lego building challenge, and virtual programming such as fitness, lecture series, and virtual field trips. Here are some additional vignettes:

A) Our youth advisory committee has a renewed focus on mental health as a priority and it will be central to all planning. Recently the team hosted a virtual youth forum to provide an opportunity for learning and connecting; provided contests for fun and connection; shared and continue to share resources for wellness, learning, and interaction. Soon they will be hosting a virtual youth showcase, more online learning opportunities, working to make resources easy to find and access, and exploring a suitable mental health project to implement. This served 110 youth in our community.

B) Our staff were tasked with keeping our older members involved in physical and social activities that would help counter the dangerous effects of loneliness and isolation. Our virtual programs have grown by offering 25 virtual programs per week thanks to receiving a grant from the province. The most popular programs are the fitness classes, but bingo, trivia, book club and special interest talks are also popular. We also offer a toll-free telephone number for members to join in our programs for those with no computer. Approximately 200 members are taking part in our virtual programs per week.

C) Our community began a senior's program in mid-April as a direct response to COVID-19. With older adult centres closed, and in-person programming on hold until further notice, we wanted to ensure that older adults still had an opportunity to stay connected with others, to socialize and to learn. Only a telephone was required and that offered individual programs such as museum talks focusing on local history, mental health awareness, live music, book discussions, lectures, trivia challenges, bingo and even chair yoga. To reach a wider audience, we partnered with local community agencies.



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OUTDOOR RECREATION & ATTRACTIONS

As restrictions on indoor gatherings continued and the weather improved, people took to the outdoors. That put pressure on Niagara's attractions. Places that the region likes to use as a draw for visitors became overwhelmed. Beaches and trails are just two examples. In this section we use information gathered from news stories and descriptive data collected from organizations such as the Niagara Parks Commission (NPC) and the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA) to illustrate this increased pressure on outdoor spaces and amenities.

Beaches

Crowded public beaches with people ignoring COVID protocols led to some municipalities limiting access. In St. Catharines, reports from police who were monitoring traffic suggested the visitor surge came from outside Niagara. St. Catharines City Council passed a bylaw limiting use of its three beaches to Niagara residents only and had security at entrances for enforcement. Port Colborne and Fort Erie restricted beach access to its local residents only. The Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA) also reported problems at the Wainfleet quarry lands, which is a passive site without gate-controlled access. Swimming, bonfires and after-hours usage – all prohibited activities – led to increased enforcement by the NPCA, the Town's Bylaw officers, the Niagara Regional Police and the Wainfleet Fire Department.



Photo courtesy of the NPCA

Trails

Morningstar Mill on Decew Road in St. Catharines was forced to close to the public in July 2020 due to overwhelming crowds that ignored social distancing, veered off the trails, and blocked the road with their vehicles. Hundreds of people at a time descended on the steep and rocky area to enjoy the Bruce Trail and Decew Falls. Failure to stay on the designated pathways led to several emergency rescues, again hindered by the congestion of cars on the road. Security personnel and barriers were set up at the site and parking access on the road was restricted (Walter, 2020).

The region's trails have been a popular destination for people, looking to get outside and enjoy nature with a change of scenery. The growing community demand for the use of natural space and

trails is demonstrated (see Table 1) from trail traffic data and gate counts for Niagara Parks, the NPCA, the Port Robinson Ferry, and the Bruce Trail (Niagara Region). Table 1 indicates traffic frequencies at the trails and spaces pre-pandemic and during lockdown phases. For the NPCA, the surge in park admissions during the pandemic-ridden months of 2020 provided a catalyst for new discussions on the need for a more fully developed trails strategy that would build capacity, improve infrastructure for safety and wayfinding, create greater potential for revenue generation and ensure longer-term funding.

From a trail-users perspective, the Freewheelers Biking Group reported an increase in interest and registrations with more than 80 people signed up for winter riding (exponentially greater than usual) and close to 50 people signed up for a new hiking program.

TABLE 1: A COMPARISON OF TRAIL SPACE ACTIVITY IN NIAGARA FROM 2019 TO 2020¹

MONTH	NIAGARA PARKS (TRAIL USE)		NPCA (GATE ADMISSIONS)		NIAGARA BRUCE TRAIL CLUB (MEMBERSHIPS)		PORT ROBINSON FERRY (GREATER NIAGARA CYCLE ROUTE)	
	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020
January	3593	3278	-	-	901	927	-	-
February	3330	3650	-	-	901	923	-	-
March	11249	15704	-	-	894	932	-	-
April	15347	9786	-	-	-	-	-	-
May	23454	22690	-	-	914	893	-	-
June	30689	42208	1802	2615	-	-	-	-
July	28052	42886	3500	9054	924	927	2348	2311
August	38056	53405	2886	9492	929	957	2464	3628
September	22396	39147	1977	4591	918	978	1991	2320
October	22737	37947	1262	3863	925	1011	762	864
November	7065	23752	-	-	933	1043	-	-
December	5005	9191	-	-	943	1122	-	-
TOTAL	210973	303644	11427	29615	9182	9713	7565	9123
	43.9% increase from 2019-2020		159.2% increase from 2019-2020		6.3% increase from 2019 to 2020		20.6% increase from 2019-2020	

Data courtesy of Niagara Parks Commission, Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, Niagara Bruce Trail Club, and Port Robinson Ferry

¹ Niagara Parks data based upon Glen Trail user data; NPCA data based upon average gate admission numbers for its three Niagara parks -- Ball's Falls, Chippawa Creek, and Long Beach -- that have gated admission (excluding seasonal or transient camping, rentals, education programs, camps and nature schools). It includes 2020 months where Conservation Areas were open to the public as per legislation; Bruce Trail data based upon Niagara Bruce Trail Club memberships (data for April and June 2019/2020 are not available). It should also be noted that Conservation Authorities have amenities other than just the trails that would attract people, such as waterfronts and interpretive centres; Port Robinson Ferry data based upon rides by pedestrians and cyclists to connect the Thorold and Niagara Falls parts of the Greater Niagara Cycle Route. The 2018 data indicated most ferry riders are Niagara participants, but this statistic is unavailable for 2019 and 2020.

ACTIVE NIAGARA NETWORK

The Active Niagara Network (ANN), an informal network of parks and recreation leaders, has existed since 2018. This group's importance grew during the pandemic as the sector sought to deal with fast-changing provincial/public health protocols and regulations. The group met virtually on a bi-weekly basis to share information, coordinate actions where necessary, and support each other.

For many years, parks and recreation delivery in Niagara lacked a coordinated approach. Individually, all 12 Niagara municipalities were engaged in parks and recreation delivery, but operationally, approached their work in isolation. This continued even as the Region submitted major games bids and hosted PanAm Games events in 2015. To address this lack of coordination, ANN had its first meeting in the spring of 2018. ANN was championed by the Centre for Sport Capacity at Brock University along with key parks and recreation professionals from various municipalities and organizations in an effort to create an ongoing forum to network and advance the parks and recreation sector throughout the region.

Members include municipal recreation professionals from 11 municipalities, the provincial liaison with the Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries; key professionals in non-profit organizations (i.e., Parks and Recreation Ontario, YMCAs), as well as other health, education, and sport professionals. In-person meetings rotated across Niagara municipalities to showcase the region's many facilities. Prior to COVID-19, agenda items tended to focus on Canada's recreation framework with the dialogue intended to help strengthen the sector in Niagara and create links among the different municipalities.

Once COVID-19 happened, the group shifted to holding virtual bi-weekly meetings because the pandemic was so new, and municipal leaders were trying to respond to community needs and emerging regulations. In reflecting on the group at a recent meeting, a recreation municipal leader said, "I hope these meetings continue because it is so valuable to hear what other municipalities are doing." While the group has taken a coordinated approach in some areas throughout the pandemic, it remains evident that decision-making is very much individualized and community-specific based on the needs of residents and user groups, and political support from respective municipal councils.



Photo courtesy of Niagara Parks Commission

The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association is working to build capacity in the parks and recreation sector as it prepares to navigate the tail end of COVID-19 public health restrictions and emergence into a post-pandemic world. Its new Re-Imagine RREC (Renew, Retool, Engage, Contribute) initiative was triggered by a need to identify best practices and recommend a new and sustainable way to deliver parks and recreation services as communities recover. Using the momentum from this national-level project and the health equity lens discussed earlier, we present our recommendations on ways the Niagara Region as a whole, and individual municipalities specifically, can strengthen the parks and recreation sector moving forward. The recommendations are arranged around two interrelated ideas: coordination and research.

Recommendation #1: Coordination

The enhanced coordination of the parks and recreation sector in Niagara is essential in both the pandemic recovery and continued progress of moving forward as a sector.

At the regional level, the Active Niagara Network has provided a springboard for municipal recreation administrators throughout the region to regularly convene and share operational information during the pandemic. The following steps would contribute to a stronger parks and recreation sector in Niagara:

First, situate ANN, representative of the 12 municipalities, as the entity that pursues policy and planning initiatives to move the parks and recreation agenda forward in Niagara. ANN's current activities are mostly knowledge-sharing around operational issues. By both expanding and formalizing its role, the parks and recreation sector could leverage its assets and strengthen its position within Niagara and beyond with key stakeholders such as Parks and Recreation Ontario and the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association.

Second, develop and promote local interorganizational relationships with public health and education sector stakeholders. These efforts could explore the role that the parks and recreation sector could serve in relation to the mandate of the existing Public Health and Social Services Committee within the Regional Municipality of Niagara – in particular, both the public health and community services areas this standing committee oversees. Key discussions at a region-wide level would advance parks and recreation throughout Niagara by

sharing and exchanging projects (e.g. master plans) and resources which support the parks and recreation sector and its work.

Recommendation #2: Research

The development of a research agenda that focuses on the local needs of the parks and recreation sector.

Such an initiative could be supported by the work of the Centre for Sport Capacity at Brock University. The intent of this recommendation is to provide a clear link between academic research and community recreation issues and reduce the gap between theory and practice. The following steps would contribute to the development of a research agenda focused on parks and recreation in Niagara:

First, establish key performance indicators across Niagara, a task that would include the gathering and analysis of local data which tracks and demonstrates the relevance and impact of the park and recreation sector for use by municipalities at budget time (on an annual basis).

Second, find ways to support and strengthen the capacity of user groups in Niagara with a focus on community sport. This recommendation aligns with a recent finding by the National Recreation and Parks Association (2020) which argues the parks and recreation sector has a clear role to ensure equitable access to youth sport opportunities.

Third, engage in knowledge translation activities that build awareness among stakeholders across government, nonprofit and private sectors in the Niagara region, including tools, resources (such as the Living in Niagara report) and forums that highlight the parks and recreation “story” and the sector’s impact on the lives of Niagara citizens.

CONCLUSION

As the pandemic continues and extends beyond one year, the immediate and lasting impacts of COVID-19 upon the parks and recreation sector are becoming more evident. Stakeholders are facing the strain of high demand and need from citizens in their communities. The risk of losing services is growing – a risk that is complicated by a critical and acute need for essential parks and recreation opportunities. The recent closures of Niagara YMCAs in Niagara Falls and St. Catharines, for example, will put more pressure on existing municipal parks and recreation services throughout the region.

Beyond operational challenges, the sector is experiencing pressing policy needs. Adopting a health equity lens has the potential to strengthen the parks and recreation sector in Niagara by providing an

alternative approach to decision-making, away from purely budgetary considerations. Instead, a health equity perspective emphasizes the value of community and individual well-being, and equitable access to parks and recreation services. Current international examples of leading organizations who have adopted a health equity lens exist and offer a strategy we may wish to follow regionally and locally. The National Recreation and Park Association and World Urban Parks are already championing the use of health equity as a primary approach for recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Reimaging RREC initiative and policy briefs (such as this one) can contribute to the ongoing evolution of the sector as it moves beyond the pandemic challenges to enhance parks and recreation provision across Niagara.

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The Niagara Community Observatory (NCO) at Brock University is a public-policy think-tank working in partnership with the Niagara community to foster, produce, and disseminate research on current and emerging local issues. More information on our office, and an electronic copy of this report, can be found on its website www.brocku.ca/nco or follow on Twitter @BrockNCO

The Centre for Sport Capacity (CSC) at Brock University is a hub for sport management research, student experiential learning, and practical support to sport organizations in the Niagara Region, across Canada, and abroad. More information can be found on its website www.brocku.ca/sport-capacity or follow on Twitter @BUSportCapacity

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